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ABSTRACT

Explosive population growth is a symptom of the world's unjust and inequitable social, political, and economic conditions. The current rate of growth is staggering, particularly in the cities of the underdeveloped countries. While some progress has been made in slowing population growth, several factors still contribute to its momentum. One of these factors is the large population increase in poorer countries. In these countries, it is economically advantageous to have large families; therefore, until conditions improve, it is not likely that the birth rate will decrease. Many people advocate zero population growth; however, what the world may need is zero population impact growth. Affluent nations have an environmental impact that is disproportionate to their population. They waste resources which could be used by the poorer countries to improve their socioeconomic conditions, thereby allowing people the economic security necessary to consider having smaller families. The belief that overpopulation can be combatted by birth control and family planning ignores the fact that it is really the result of a wasteful world. Major changes in social, political, and economic systems are necessary to reduce population growth. (DC)

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RAPID POPULATION GROWTH - CAUSE OR RESULT OF GLOBAL PROBLEMS?

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RAPID POPULATION GROWTH - CAUSE OR RESULT OF GLOBAL PROBLEMS?

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One of the critical problems that the world faces today is that of explosive population growth. There is a great deal of concern about the world's ability to provide enough food, energy, housing, employment, education, and health care for the world's increasing population, while simultaneously protecting our environment, quality of life, and political freedom.

Population statistics are staggering. While it took all of human history for the world's population to reach one billion people, it now increases at the rate of one billion people every ten to twelve years. Global population reached four billion people in 1976, and is expected to be over six billion by the end of the century. The world's population is growing at such a rate that every three years the increase is equivalent to the population of the United States. Every six months the world's population increase equals the amount of people killed in all of the world's wars in the last five hundred years.

At current rates, the world's population will double to about nine billion people in approximately forty years. Many poor countries such as Mexico and Nicaragua have population doubling times of only twenty years. This means that, in order to maintain present, general inadequate conditions, these countries must double their supply of food, energy, clean water, housing, schools, and jobs in less than twenty years. For many countries, this may prove impossible; the result may be increasing poverty, malnutrition, and civil unrest and revolution.

Additional population problems are related to the increasing movement of people from rural areas to the cities, searching for better jobs and social

conditions. The population in cities in the underdeveloped countries has grown at an alarming rate. Mexico City had three million people in 1950; it is projected to have over thirty million people by the year 2000. The population of Lima, Peru grew by over 1600 percent in a recent fifty year period. Such third world cities have been unable to meet the needs of their rapidly growing populations. The results have been the formation of slums on the outskirts of the cities, with inadequate housing, sanitation, employment, education and great potential for social unrest.

While there has been some recent progress in slowing the rate of population increase, the following factors contribute to population growth momentum:

. Recent population growth has been primarily due to decreases in death rates due to better medical and sanitary facilities. Birth rates have actually decreased recently in most countries of the world, but death rates have decreased more. Barring famine and widespread war, death rates are likely to continue to drop.

. The largest population increases have occurred in the poorer countries, where children are desired for economic reasons (this will be discussed later.) Due to increasing inflation and unemployment, the absolute number of people who are in poverty is increasing.

. Forty percent of people in the poorer countries are under fifteen years of age. This provides impetus to population growth, as a large number of people will be moving into their reproductive years in the next twenty years.

Why do people in the poorer countries have so many children? For millions of people there is no unemployment pay, sickness benefits, or old-age pensions. Children, therefore, are regarded as the only form of security in periods of

unemployment, illness and old-age. Also, children in the underdeveloped countries are an economic asset. By the age of seven or eight, children are net contributors to the family - fetching water and firewood from distant places, looking after younger children, freeing adults for other jobs by cooking, cleaning, and mending clothes. Furthermore, infant mortality rates, while reduced in recent years, are still high in the underdeveloped world, and many children are desired so that some will survive to provide old-age security.

Because of these conditions, family planning programs on their own are ineffective in lowering the birth rate. It is necessary to improve the economic and social conditions of people so that they no longer feel that they must have many children for economic survival and old-age security.

Many people feel that rapid population growth is the greatest problem that the world faces, and that too many people in the world result in hunger, resource depletion, and environmental degradation. They advocate ZPG, zero population growth.

However, perhaps what the world really needs is not ZPG, but ZPIG, zero population impact growth. For it is not just the number of people that is important, but how much they produce, consume, and waste. Affluent nations have an effect on the environment disproportionate to their populations. The United States, for example, has only five percent of the world's population, yet uses about thirty five percent of the world's resources and energy, while producing half of the world's pollution. It has been estimated that an average person in the United States has an impact on the world's life-support systems (in terms of resource consumption and pollution caused) equal to about fifty people in an underdeveloped country. This gives the United States a population

impact equal to about eleven billion third-world people, well over twice the world's population.

At international population conferences, when delegates from affluent countries ask delegates from poor countries why they don't slow their population growth, they generally respond: why don't you stop being so wasteful; why don't you stop using so much of the world's resources, resources that we need in order to develop our countries so that people will have the economic security necessary for them to consider having smaller families.

Another important factor, often overlooked by advocates of population as the prime cause of global problems, is the unjust and inequitable systems which lead to poverty and malnutrition. Several studies have shown that the world now produces enough food to provide an adequate diet for every person on earth. Yet valuable land is used to grow luxury crops for rich local elites or for export, while masses of people lack an adequate diet. Due to inequitable distribution of land, only about half of the world's potential agricultural land is now being cultivated. In Ecuador, for example, only fourteen percent of the tillable land is being used. Trade laws which are rigged against the poor countries keep them on a perpetual treadmill, constantly falling further behind no matter how hard they work.

In conclusion, there are two prevalent attitudes about current population growth which can be dangerous to global survival. One is that population is the greatest threat to the planet and must be combatted via better birth control and family planning methods. This ignores the fact that population growth is a symptom and a result of a wasteful, unjust world, and major changes in social, political, and economic systems are necessary to reduce population growth and other global threats. The other dangerous attitude is that population growth is

not a problem, that through technology we can provide enough food and other resources for all the world's people. This ignores the geometric (doubling) nature of population growth and the fact that technology placed in an unjust, materialistic world, has generally been part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

Population growth is not the chief cause of global problems. With more just, equitable, and less wasteful systems, we could have enough food and other resources for all of the world's current and future people. Given more economic security, people will naturally start to limit their families, as has occurred in affluent countries in Europe and the United States. However, unless the world changes its present unjust and inequitable, social, political and economic conditions, the world's population will continue to grow, along with global problems of hunger, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and threats of violence.